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6th February 2012

Dear Ian

OFSTED REPORT – CHILD PROTECTION

As indicated in our recent discussion, I am writing to you in order to set out the views of UNISON members employed in Children's Safeguarding following the recent OFSTED report on the Local Authority's arrangements for the protection of children. The views set out in this letter arise out of points raised at a well attended meeting of UNISON members employed in Children's Safeguarding which was held last week. Views have also been gathered by means of informal soundings by Stewards and representations made direct to the Branch.

Given the quite exceptional level of nervousness and uncertainty which has been generated by the report, and a number of issues of concern which have arisen as a result of the way some of these matters have been reported in the media, I believe it is essential that an early meeting should take place between relevant senior managers and UNISON representatives in order to discuss the situation and to begin the task of mapping out a more positive way forward. The importance of this was stressed to Steve Beynon by UNISON Executive Committee members at a meeting held earlier this week. The Branch welcomes the quick response by the Council to these representations and the fact that a meeting between Branch Officers and Stewards working in this area has already been proposed for next week.

In the meantime, I should like to stress the following points put forward by staff at last week's meeting:-

1. There is clearly an atmosphere of widespread nervousness and many staff are worried about openly expressing their concerns for fear of criticism or reprisals from senior management and/or Councillors.

2. The way some of these issues have been reported in the media has generated a suspicion that certain staff may be blamed unfairly and used as scapegoats for the failings of others in much more senior positions. These fears are understandably exacerbating the sense of dismay and frustration which staff felt on the publication of the OFSTED findings.

3. There are clearly aspects of the report which do not come as a great surprise to staff. A number of people at the meeting made the point that some areas of service delivery, and aspects of practice, have been inadequate and potentially dangerous for a considerable period. They are expressing a deep frustration and concern that many of these issues have been flagged up by them on a regular basis through the line management chain but that nothing they have said has seemed to be taken on board at senior levels of the organisation.

4. There has clearly been a deep concern and unease about capacity issues for a long time and examples have been given of particular areas of pressure which are ongoing. Staff believe it is imperative that this issue should be addressed as quickly as possible but, sadly, have little faith that anything is likely to change in the approach to the management of the service. They consider that an early acknowledgement that the problems they are raising are genuine would be very helpful in beginning to restore confidence.

5. It is clear that the staff group as a whole are dedicated to their work and are desperate to provide a good service. They wish to be flexible in terms of new approaches and believe they have already made many attempts to demonstrate this in very difficult circumstances. They are keen to engage in the necessary dialogue with management to ensure that the service can develop positively and are entirely prepared to engage in any necessary training to help in this.

6. To assist in making the necessary "fresh start" it would be helpful if the Council could publicly acknowledge that it wishes to adopt a more inclusive approach that takes the views of the workforce (and its representatives) more seriously than in the past and that it wishes to move forward in a spirit of genuine partnership. It is clear from the meeting that many staff still feel bruised by past comments by management that "they needed to prove that they were good enough for the Isle of Wight". Strong feelings were expressed that the staff group now needs to be assured that management itself is "good enough for the Isle of Wight". The partnership approach outlined above is seen as a key first step in ensuring that everyone is moving forward together.

7. It is evident that there is considerable anxiety about the current budget situation and a fear that there may be job losses in the Children's Safeguarding area. In this situation, considerable concern has been expressed about the situation for support staff. It is clear that social workers

regard the position of Unit Co-ordinator as essential and that there would be considerable resistance to any attempt to remove this role or to reduce the numbers of these staff. There is similar support for other non-qualified staff who are clearly regarded as indispensable in terms of service delivery.

8. It is considered essential that time be set aside to enable management and staff to jointly work through the many important issues that need to be tackled right across the Safeguarding service. There is widespread worry that a piecemeal approach in which matters are looked at on a section by section basis will be counter-productive. It could also maximise the potential for compulsory redundancies by limiting genuine redeployment opportunities.

9. Staff across the Directorate want to be positive in this situation and have asked UNISON to help them to engage in a solution-focussed approach. In response to this, the Branch will be establishing a Working Group made up of a representative group of workers in the Safeguarding area in order to raise concerns and consider possible solutions in a positive way. I hope that, over the forthcoming months, it will be possible to set up regular joint meetings between managers and members of this Working Group to supplement the normal consultation arrangements and the Directorate's internal staff meetings.

As a final point, it needs to be said that the latest consultation on the structure of the Fostering and Adoption Service is already exacerbating a number of the above concerns as the jobs of all non-qualified staff now appear under threat and staff are unaware of adequate alternative employment options in other sections. This consultation is also seen as being premature in that a specialist has only just been engaged by the Authority for the sole purpose of examining the Fostering and Adoption Service. In these circumstances, it is considered that no decisions should be made until his review is completed.

I hope that the above comments will be seen as being made in a constructive spirit and that they can be helpful in enabling the service to move ahead. UNISON representatives look forward to elaborating on these points and discussing them further at next week's proposed meeting. In the meantime, if there is any aspect of this matter which you would like to discuss further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Mark Chiverton
Branch Secretary

Mr. I. Anderson
Director for Community Wellbeing and Social Care

c.c UNISON members in Children's Safeguarding
Andy Straker and Elizabeth Wagstaffe – UNISON SE Region